some sort, they rose swiftly up. The weight of the mountain had been oppressive. It should have lightened now, but Nadia's stomach knotted with apprehension, and sweat stood out above her lip. An anonymous death in the depths might be preferable to a confrontation with what they sought. The Speaker was the only one who stepped forward when they came to a stop and the doors opened on a laboratory. Spock reached out and stopped him, while T'serek slowly lowered the Romulan to the ground. S'Tyge was conscious again, looking drawn and smaller with pain. With an effort he lifted his wounded arm and thrust it into his jerkin. The tendons stood out on his good hand as he did so, and his jaw muscles worked, but he made no sound.

The room they faced was circular, if it continued its unbroken curve past the periphery of their vision. Its walls were smokily transparent, and they looked out at the slag and cooled lava of the volcano's crater. The inner walls rose up, broken by dark holes--gaping tunnel entrances like the one they had taken from the river. A wrong turning, supposing they had ever survived to see the surface, would have brought them out there, barred from this installation by the crater floor.

T'serek shifted his grip on S'Tyge's sword and took a sudden step out and to the right. There was no answering sound from the laboratory, and they could hear him move away, quietly at first, then more surely. Even so, his sudden reappearance startled a yelp of fright into Nadia's throat. Her nerves were on edge as if someone were playing sonics over her.

"Block the lift," S'Tyge said hoarsely.

Spock nodded and T'serek took Clement's knife and wedged it firmly into the crack between the floor of the lift and the laboratory where it would catch the doors and presumably prevent them from closing. The Vulcan led them out of the lift and they began a tentative exploration of the consoles and equipment, unsure of their freedom to move, their safety from attack. The Speaker found a chair and sank into it, but the Romulan stayed stubbornly upon his feet, following Spock's slow perusal of the equipment, watching T'serek stalk about the perimiter, looking for other entrances or exits. Quiet Beth Sunderson was the first to see something familiar, and then Clement pointed to another machine which evidently made sense to him

What's the matter with me, Nadia thought. I'm as bad as Craven. Her hand was shaking before her and her face was wet with sweat. She forced herself to move about, but it was a blind cover for thinly controlled panic. Now, when she finally had a chance to do something, she was going to pieces and Sunderson, even Clement, was at least making an effort to help Spock find something to make sense of all this insanity.

"It's the artifact," S'Tyge said conversationally. "You're sensitive to it." He nodded very slightly at the Speaker. "Look at him. He knows."

"Knows what?"

"It let us come here. It has a purpose for everything it does."

"How do you know so much about it," she challenged.

"I talked to the people who found it originally."

"Tortured them, you mean."

The Romulan's face darkened. He was very aware of his own pain and what it had brought him to with Spock. He could feel the steady scrutiny T'serek spared him from his other efforts. But he would not deny it.

"The Wielda did worse than that to one of them," he retorted. "It possessed him. The first thing he did was try to kill his friends. By dismembering them. Like my men. Like my hand."

Nadia knew he was using her revulsion, her shrinking from his very evident pain, to keep her attention. She backed away and her voice was shaking.

"I don't want to discuss it." She looked around and saw Spock and Clement poking behind a console that adjoined the shaft the lift rode in. She crossed the room, and S'Tyge turned his back looking out the windows.

"It's a core tap, it's got to be, if this the original Ixmahx construct. What else inside atmosphere could keep it powered so long?" Clement sounded impatient and excited. "And this black metal--the dome is probably a different phase of the same thing--absorbs energy directly. That's why they felt safe to put it in an active volcano."

"Yes," Spock agreed. "The ultimate refinement upon a moat. It should be possible to fill the crater with magma at will."

"You wouldn't even lose any power. If this stuff still works."

"We must hope it does. Yes, Dr. Palevi?"

She didn't really have anything to say, except that S'Tyge knew more about the Wielda than they did.

He had been avoiding that, of course. He told her what he wanted and stood up. The Romulan did not turn when he approached, and Spock did not immediately confront him. They stood looking out over the crater while the sun set. Through the clear glass they could see two birds circling in a thermal over the cliffs. Dark against the smoke and rust of the sun, they rose without effort, masters of the upper air.

"They are predators," S'Tyge said.

"Then they must be mates." Spock spoke without thinking, his mind on the rocky wasteland that surrounded the volcano. On Vulcan there were vaster reaches, with less life. Only one imperative overruled the drive for individual survival at the top of the food chain.

"Not where there is enough prey for everyone."

"Here," Spock answered, "there is not."

"No." S'Tyge shifted and took a steadying breath. "When I understood the danger I sent my ship away. "But they are ambitious men. They may believe I'm trying to take the artifact for myself. When your ship returns, they will come to do battle for it. Then, eventually, it will make no difference which side has it. It will rule them."

"It must be destroyed."